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Transcription of Colorado's wildland-urban interface: a growing challenge

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BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION

00:00:09:24 - 00:00:33:14

Unknown

The wild and urban interface that you hear a lot about are called Willie, as it is sometimes called. That's where our housing developments and our communities directly interface with unbroken forests. Colorado has a huge number of people living in the wildland urban interface, and more and more, it's not that cabin at home in the middle of nowhere. That's a secondary home.

00:00:33:15 - 00:00:57:17

Unknown

It's people living in their permanent primary residences up against the forest. Unhealthy forests have increasingly led to catastrophic wildfires that impact the safety and quality of life for people who live in Colorado. In fact, the foremost destructive wildfires in Colorado history in terms of property losses, have all occurred since 2009.

00:00:57:19 - 00:01:21:23

Unknown

Fire is not always bad. It's a natural part of Colorado's ecosystems, and many less intense fires actually are beneficial to the landscape. But overgrown forests, coupled with a growing number of homes in the wildland urban interface, make it imperative to reduce wildland fuels in the absence of natural wildfires. We're working with individuals and communities dealing with fire mitigation issues.

00:01:21:23 - 00:01:44:19

Unknown

It's really important that they buy in that they understand how important this is to them and to their community. I'm looking at Scorch Heights up in there. The 2013 Black Forest fire north of Colorado Springs quickly became the most destructive fire in state history in terms of property losses. Nearly 500 homes were destroyed by the fire. Wow, that was bad.

00:01:44:20 - 00:02:10:28

Unknown

That was worse than last year. I know that in my career, I. I know fire behavior pretty strong. I'm a pretty competent firefighter, and the reactions and things that I'm seeing in the life fuels are not things that I have seen before. 200ft flame lengths pushing across six miles and in 12 hours. That's a lot of fire examples of scorched heights, even on the trees.

00:02:10:28 - 00:02:40:04

Unknown

Those are 35, 40, 50ft skirts. Heights. While the losses in the Black Forest were extensive, some areas survived the fire relatively intact despite the drought and high winds. The Colorado State Forest Service guided fuels mitigation projects in this area over several years to help create a shaded fuel break, an area in which the forest is thin, to transition an approaching wildfire from a catastrophic crown fire to a less intense surface fire.

00:02:40:07 - 00:02:59:23

Unknown

One week after the fire, Scott Campbell inspects the schoolhouse section, an area of the forest that has seen years of active forest management. Is it because something we did, something that just happened? Is there a lesson to be learned there that we can apply? It appears that what we see now is as a fire move through this piece.

00:02:59:23 - 00:03:25:17

Unknown

And the conditions that were present is that our scorch heights are much lower. When the fire blew through here, it did exactly what we hoped it would do. The fire dropped to the ground. It became a low intensity burn in the grass and black and a few tree trunks. But in six months, you probably will never know that a fire went through this area.

00:03:25:20 - 00:03:52:01

Unknown

It'll recover just fine if every single person, every single property owner, and every single property in here had been mitigated to this standard, we may still had a fire. The question is, is the severity? Yeah, I cut out the one and we got that done. And Walt Sealy is a Black Forest resident who had completed fire mitigation work and had to evacuate as the fire approached.

00:03:52:02 - 00:04:18:03

Unknown

He didn't know what he would find when he was allowed back into the area. Days later, what happened? As I came home from evacuation, I discovered that the fire had come over the hill and come down and what it had done, it has had burned up on the surface. The pine needles, the tall field grass, all of that right up to the edge of where I had mode.

00:04:18:03 - 00:04:45:05

Unknown

And there it stopped and I said, wow, mitigation really works. He spent many years thinning the dense forest on his land and creating defensible space near his home. We would have definitely lost the house. There was there was nothing to stop it. Had I not done the work? If firefighters are going to defend a home from an approaching wildfire, it's critical that they have a safe zone to work in.

00:04:45:07 - 00:05:15:06

Unknown

No structure is worth the loss of a human life. The important thing in an area around your home, a defensible space, was it gave firefighters an opportunity to come and defend his house and do that safely in some other sections of the Black Forest. A higher percentage of the homes were spared. Now we have some neighborhoods here in Black Forest where the mitigation was done on a neighborhood scale.

00:05:15:08 - 00:05:59:07

Unknown

You know, they fared and came through the fire tremendously well. We have fuels that are very hazardous here, you know, especially along the Front Range and in Colorado in general, that, you know, any opportunity that communities can use to get some separation from those hazardous fuels, whether they're community wide fuels projects or whether they are locally based defensible spaces, will certainly make it more advantageous for firefighters getting in there and being safe, doing the work in southwestern Colorado, Firewise Southwest Colorado and the Colorado State Forest Service have been actively working with communities to develop community wildfire protection plans.

00:05:59:13 - 00:06:29:20

Unknown

Our Firewise group is a local grassroots organization, and we work with communities, residents trying to help them understand what their wildfire risk is and what they can do to mitigate that risk. Farther north, the Log Hill subdivision near Ridgeway also has developed a community wildfire protection plan approved by the Colorado State Forest Service. Log Hill has a volunteer fire department within the community, and they've been involved in promoting wildfire mitigation.

00:06:29:23 - 00:06:56:22

Unknown

As far as defensible space, that's defensible space for a home, but for a firefighter, that's actually survivable space. But we used it as a educational tool so that we told people, these are the things you need to do increase your defensible space, mark your driveway with reflective addressing, increase the size of your driveway, things like that. And people have been very, very supportive.

00:06:56:24 - 00:07:31:28

Unknown

The president of the Log Hill Homeowners Association is one of the strongest supporters of wildfire mitigation. I consider wildfire to be among the top three priorities of the homeowners association. West Region Wildfire Council has provided all kinds of data that shows that

communities that mitigate have survived enormous wildfires. The West Region Wildfire Council has worked with the Colorado State Forest Service and Log Hill homeowners to find cost share grants to make the work more affordable.

00:07:32:00 - 00:07:56:14

Unknown

Interagency collaboration is the key to any sort of wildfire mitigation project, and it provides a really good opportunity for homeowners and folks that want to do cross boundary fuels reduction to work together on such projects and really make an impact on the landscape. A cost share grant helped thin trees and vegetation to create this shaded fuel break on land that is yet to be developed.

00:07:56:15 - 00:08:22:05

Unknown

Fuels mitigation work also has the added benefit of addressing other forest management concerns, resulting in healthier, more resilient forests. You know, this guy kind of got a lot of bang for his buck, and he also helped his adjacent landowners, his neighbors, by clearing out a lot of the vegetation around his lot. So, you know, with an approaching fire, it might help his neighbors blow him or his neighbor up here above him.

00:08:22:06 - 00:08:42:01

Unknown

I would say over the last three years that I've been here, there has been a lot of progress. We've really seen, you know, mitigation take hold. We've seen the domino effect where a neighbor completes mitigation project, and then their neighbor wants to complete a mitigation project.

00:08:42:03 - 00:09:11:06

Unknown

If you want to make a difference to the forest environment, it really needs to be done at the landscape level, because forest processes generally operate at a more landscape level. In April 2011, during a very dry early spring, a fire started in the mountains west of Fort Collins and right over there, like at the whole top of that ridge, there was just a gigantic wall of flames just lighting up the whole ridgetop.

00:09:11:08 - 00:09:32:21

Unknown

The crystal fire was fast moving, wind driven. It descended on Corey Phillips and Linda Masterson and their neighbors. Late one night in early April of 2011. They gathered a few things, warned all the neighbors, and then evacuated in a hurry, trying to remember what should we take? Would you can't remember anything when you have 15 minutes? And that's why you have to have a plan.

00:09:32:22 - 00:09:55:27

Unknown

We were better prepared than most, but we were nowhere near as well prepared as we could. Or we should have been. Linda and Corey learned a lot from their experience, and now they're motivated to share their

advice. After your house burns down, there's nothing you can do about all the preparation you could have done and you should have done ahead of time.

00:09:56:00 - 00:10:23:18

Unknown

We weren't able to rebuild because we were underinsured. Insuring properties in the wildland urban interface is an evolving issue, and insurance companies are beginning to promote wildfire mitigation. Carol Walker remembers the record setting fire season of 2012. We had the High Park Fire and the Waldo Canyon fire, making it the most expensive wildfire season in state history, with over \$600 million in insured losses.

00:10:23:20 - 00:10:46:13

Unknown

Wildfire is a risk where we know there's quite a bit that people can do to put the odds in their favor. So increasingly, insurance companies are looking at that wildfire risk, those individual properties insane. We expect you to share that risk if we're going to ensure you if you're going to live in a high risk wildfire area of Colorado, we expect you to do the scientifically proven steps to protect your property.

00:10:46:15 - 00:11:13:25

Unknown

Forest management can increase forest resiliency and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. The Colorado State Forest Service continues to provide fuels reduction and wildfire mitigation assistance to private landowners and communities through field offices located around the state, but it remains the responsibility of each individual landowner to decide whether to take action before a wildfire arrives. Wildfire mitigation is everyone's responsibility.

00:11:13:26 - 00:11:24:25

Unknown

By working together, we can create healthier forests and safer communities. Human lives are at stake, properties at stake. The very vitality and existence of the communities are at stake.

END TRANSCRIPTION